CHAPTER XVIII

BIRTH CUSTOMS, CHILDHOOD

Birth Customs

843 Among the Sgaw Karen in the Pegu Hills and on the plains there appear to be but few special customs connected with the births of children. Offspring are desired, and a large family gives joy to the parents. A pregnant woman experiences but little lightening of her usual tasks and works up to the time of her delivery. The prospective mother is expected to omit bitter herbs and fruits from her diet, as these are thought to be harmful to her; while her husband avoids having his hair cut during her pregnancy, lest it should bring ill-luck and shorten the life of the child.

844 Old women usually serve as midwives and are sometimes believed to possess considerable skill in aiding delivery, although they are without special training for the function they perform. Custom is too deeply ingrained for them to profit much from their own experience. They resort to massage to hasten the birth, and in stubborn cases they tread upon the abdomen to expel the foetus. They believe in aiding nature rather than in letting nature take its own course, even in normal cases. For her services the midwife receives a rupee and a bundle of dried bark for the preparation of a head-washing solution ("t' yaw"). She uses the solution to prevent the eruption of some sort of itching skin-disease, after which she [845] anoints herself with sandal wood. In case the delivery should be abnormal, the midwife would receive double wages. If the labors are unduly prolonged and she can not bring things to pass, she sends for a soothsayer or a medicine-man, who usually gives the suffering woman little else than a cup of charmed water ("hti th' mu").

165 845 When a woman dies before the child is delivered, it must be extracted before the funeral ceremonies are performed. In case this can not be conveniently done at the time, the operation is postponed until the body is carried to the place of burning or burial, the foetus being then removed through an incision in the abdomen. This operation is thought necessary, in order to prevent the reincarna-

19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1923 AP1 Burma
Karen AP7

served their tabus they prospered, but when they neglected them they suffered adversity, it is alleged.

Marriage of a Karen with a person of another race was formerly strictly forbidden. This exclusiveness kept the racial stock pure and unmixed. In recent times the prohibition has not been rigorously enforced. Hence, the barriers between the Karen on the one hand and the Burmese and Shan on the other have been somewhat weakened, betokening—it must be confessed—a moral looseness that was unknown before. The village elders have always maintained that marriages outside of the tribe ("taw leu hko") were not good, although such unions have not been lately tabued. Marriages between members of the same tribe or of the same village, providing the parties concerned are not more closely related than cousins, are permitted. To marry a relative closer than a cousin would be incest, and all the tribes forbid such unions. On the day of a wedding in a village the inhabitants are forbidden to labor.

Adultery and fornication are under strict tabu, except in the Red Karen tribe,[2] the belief among the other tribes being that these sins are offensive to the "Bgha" [3] and destroy the productiveness of the fields, the "Lords of the earth" withholding their favor from the crops when they find that such deeds have been committed. In making their annual feast to these deities, the Bwe tribe formerly required those who had been guilty of uncleanness during the year to confess their sins and did not permit them to come near the sacrificial altars.

A number of prohibitions are connected with birth. One of the Sgaw precepts forbids pregnant women to eat the flesh of the curious monkey-tiger *(Ictides ater)*, bitter herbs, and the long smooth pod called alligator's tongue. Before the men adopted the modern fashion of wearing their hair short, the husband of a woman who was with child was not permitted to trim his locks, for fear of shortening the life of his expected offspring. During the first six days following a birth the custom of the Paduang denies to the father the right of associating or even speaking with any one, except his own family. He alone cares for the mother and child during the period named.[4] The purpose of thus secluding the father is to prevent the transmission of the danger and weakness

[2] See Dr. Mason's account in the *Journal, Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1866.

[3] This is true in those localities where the "Bgha" are regarded as the family penates. In other localities, as among the Bwe, the offended powers were the "lords of the earth."

[4] Lieutenant E. W. Carrick, *Report on Bwe Expedition*, 1894-95, p. 12.

[5] E. B. Cross, J. A. O. S. (1854) Vol. IV, 293, ff. and D. C. Gilmore, Journ. Burma